



NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Nicaragua: Building Confidence and Participation in the Electoral Process

PRELIMINARY REPORT

October 23, 2001

Nicaragua will hold national elections on November 4, 2001, against a backdrop of rising political tension and public disillusionment with the democratic process. The perception of domination and manipulation of the political system by the two main parties, the polarization of the political landscape, and a fragile democratic culture are among the factors that have led citizens to question the integrity of democratic institutions and practices. Nicaraguan political leaders must build a climate of confidence and encourage citizen participation in the electoral process to achieve political stability and lay the groundwork for democratic strengthening and crucial economic development after the elections.

I. OBJECTIVES

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is working with political and civic leaders to increase confidence and participation in the November elections. The program has the following objectives:

- To help to ensure the fair and effective conduct of the elections, both leading up to and on election day.
- To engage citizens constructively in the electoral process through political parties and civic organizations.

II. ACTIVITIES

To achieve these objectives, NDI has helped to prepare civil society groups and political parties to monitor the electoral process. Since mid-August, the Institute has carried out the following activities:

- NDI conducted a mission to evaluate the political situation and lay the groundwork for a program to strengthen domestic observation efforts.¹
- NDI established a ten-person office in Managua, located a field representative on the Atlantic Coast, and put in place a non-partisan liaison in 13 departments and regions to help organize the training activities.

¹ NDI financed this activity through another source of funding.

- NDI developed a training manual for political party pollwatchers that addresses the voting and counting process, as well as the roles and responsibilities of the various actors at the polling stations (*Juntas Receptoras de Voto – JRVs*). Produced versions in Spanish and Miskito, a coastal language.
- NDI prepared party trainers, who in turn will train pollwatchers, from all 17 departments and regions and representing all parties contesting the elections, in particular the Conservative Party of Nicaragua (PCN).
- NDI conducted spot checks on PCN training sites to ensure that the party was carrying out the pollwatcher training and to provide technical support.
- NDI assisted the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PCN) in carrying out its own pollwatcher training program by supporting the work of trainers and supervisors, and conducting spot checks on the training program to ensure accountability and provide input.
- NDI drafted a guide and prepared a program to instruct political party observers (*fiscales*) to monitor the work in the data centers at the municipal and departmental levels.
- NDI organized the visits of international experts on election observation and strategic communication, including Rafael Roncagliolo, executive director of the Peruvian observer group Transparency, to provide political, institutional and technical support to civil society groups monitoring the electoral process.
- NDI organized a retreat for Ethics and Transparency (ET), Nicaragua's leading watchdog group, providing an opportunity for board members to discuss election day scenarios and prepare communication strategies.
- NDI assisted civil society groups in communicating their messages through media training for ET president Gabriel Solorzano and recommendations of media experts to support the Civic Electoral Consortium, a coalition of civil society groups monitoring the electoral process.
- NDI advised ET and the Consortium on supporting the electoral process in areas such as the deployment of local observers within the Municipal Electoral Councils (CEM).
- NDI communicated information about NDI's and ET's programs to the public through the media to help ensure accurate and complete coverage of domestic monitoring efforts to help increase the credibility of those efforts and strengthen public confidence.
- NDI advised the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) on strengthening the administration of the election and building public confidence.

III. RESULTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

To date, NDI's program has achieved the following results:

Result 1: Elections are conducted fairly, both leading up to and on election day.

Indicator 1.1: Political parties and civil society groups put in place structures necessary to conduct effective monitoring efforts, including the creation of strategic plans and legal teams.

Political Party Monitoring

- With assistance from NDI, the PCN developed a plan to place pollwatchers in JRVs across the country. The plan included the identification of party liaisons in each department and region and the establishment of communication structures.
- In the training sessions, participants and their party colleagues developed plans to prepare pollwatchers in each department and region. While these plans are different for each party, they typically outline a training schedule on a municipal basis.²
- Following the training sessions, regional parties YATAMA and PAMUC in the Region of the Atlantic North (RAAN) and the Region of the Atlantic South (RAAS) indicated that they can now prepare party members to monitor the work in the JRVs. They intend to use the manuals that NDI supplied in Miskito as well as Spanish.
- The PLC, FSLN and PCN, plus regional parties on the Atlantic Coast and the Nicaragua Resistance Party (PRN), requested to participate in NDI's program to prepare *fiscales* to monitor the work in the data centers on the municipal and departmental levels. The program will target the areas of greatest concern to the parties, particularly the review of the arithmetic on the tally sheets (*actas*) and the transmission of the data to the departmental or national levels.
- Acting on advice from NDI, the PCN is organizing an effort within the party to obtain copies of the results systematically from the JRVs where it has pollworkers or pollwatchers. This information will provide the party with an additional way to make a well-supported pronouncement on the official results and increase confidence in the elections. In addition, NDI has advised the PLC and FSLN on how to organize a department to obtain, maintain and analyze data from the JRVs.

² See Appendix A for data regarding training plans.

Civil Society Observation

- ET's retreat enabled the organization to examine possible election day scenarios affecting the release of quick count information. By working through possible events, ET will be better prepared to handle politically difficult issues that may arise. Given the importance of ET's quick count to public confidence in the election, this planning is critical.
- According to Mariela Lopez Sanchez of Creative Associates, the firm helping to coordinate the work of the Consortium, Roncagliolo's presentation to Consortium members encouraged them to develop a media strategy, and more generally to cooperate better and overlook ideological differences. In his meeting with over 30 Consortium representatives, Roncagliolo named "science, t-shirts [visibility of volunteers], communications and independence" as the four ingredients of a successful non-partisan domestic observation effort.

Indicator 1.2: Political parties and civil society groups effectively collect and analyze information and communicate findings.

Civil Society Observation

- Also during his visit, Roncagliolo assisted ET in developing messages and a strategy to communicate them to the public, including how and when to release its quick count results.

Indicator 1.3: Political parties pursue complaints and seek remedies in an appropriate manner.

Political Party Monitoring

- During the pollwatching training sessions, NDI trainers discussed with participants what are valid *impugnaciones* and how to file them, at the same time discouraging them from instructing *fiscales* to challenge results for political purposes.³
- Party president Mario Rapaccioli announced that his party, whose supporters will serve as the second member at each polling station, would not take the side of one party or another, but rather respect the voice of the people:

At the time of challenges or important decisions with respect to the voting process, obviously the other two parties will be opposed to each other, we will be the balancing force, with the promise that... we will act in accordance with the law to guarantee that the vote will not be fiddled with. (La Prensa, October 19, 2001)

³ See Appendix B for copy of the training program and photos taken at various training sites.

Rapaccioli and first candidate to the National Assembly Ernesto Leal have recognized NDI's contribution to this strategy.

- The PLC, FSLN and PCN have expressed to NDI a willingness to enter into an agreement to refrain from filing unwarranted *impugnaciones*. NDI is currently negotiating this agreement with the parties.

Indicator 1.4: Political party pollwatchers and nonpartisan domestic monitors demonstrated an understanding of their rights and responsibilities and the roles of their counterparts, including pollworkers and international observers.

Political Party Monitoring

- Participants' knowledge about the voting and counting process improved on account of the pollwatcher training sessions.⁴ Participants demonstrated a greater understanding of the differences between the 2000 municipal elections and the 2001 national elections processes. They also showed an understanding of the differences between *impugnaciones* and *quejas*, as well as the benefits of refraining from challenging the results unless in compliance with strict application of the law. One participant in the Managua training session said, "When I filled out the first form [evaluating existing knowledge], I only knew a few of the answers. Now, I think I got the whole thing right."
- NDI printed 15,000 copies of the Spanish version of the pollwatcher training manual – 5,000 copies more than expected to meet the parties' demand. NDI also printed copies in Miskito.⁵
- NDI provided the PCN with the copies of its training manual to carry out the party's training program. While the FSLN and PLC originally declined to use NDI's manual, the FSLN recently requested copies for its training program in the RAAS, and the PLC requested copies in Miskito also for use on the Atlantic Coast in preparation for next year's regional elections. At the party's request, NDI also agreed to provide the PRN copies. These manuals will help to educate pollwatchers about their rights and responsibilities, even if they do not receive training through an NDI-instructed trainer.
- Brooklyn Rivera, president of YATAMA and regional representative, thanked NDI for conducting the pollwatcher training, noted its high quality, and requested additional sessions. In response, during the training sessions for *fiscales* in the data centers, the Institute will share information to help prepare pollwatchers in the JRVs to the extent possible.
- NDI worked with the media to convey information about the responsibilities of pollwatchers in filing *impugnaciones*, suggesting that journalists report on the

⁴ See Appendix C for data regarding improvement in participant knowledge.

⁵ See Appendix D for copies of the manual in Spanish, English and Miskito.

benefits of refraining from filing unwarranted *impugnaciones* except when in strict accordance with the law. Channel 2 invited NDI resident director Guillermo Marquez to discuss on an upcoming television program the necessity of avoiding the filing of *impugnaciones* for political purposes and the importance of speeding up the transmission of results on election day.

Result 2: Citizens become engaged in the electoral process through political parties and civic organizations.

Indicator 2.1: An NDI-supported political party pollwatcher is present at a majority of polling sites.

Political Party Monitoring

- Through the program, “For Nicaragua, with my Party: Training Workshop for Political Party Pollwatchers,” NDI trained 435 political party representatives, who in turn could ultimately train over 8,000 pollwatchers.⁶
- Representatives of seven political parties participated in the training: PCN, 356; FSLN, 26; Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC), 13; YATAMA, 20; Movement of Coastal Unity Party (PAMUC), 10; Nicaraguan Resistance Party (PRN), 9; Liberal Independent Party (PLI), 1.⁷

While the PLC and FSLN at the national level declined to participate in the training program, local leadership from these parties on the Atlantic Coast sent representatives to the sessions. The member of the PLI, which is not a legally recognized party, participated at the invitation of the PCN. The PRN, a legal party in alliance with the PLC, requested the opportunity to send 250 of its members to the training sessions.

- Following the sessions, participants demonstrated a commitment to carry out subsequent training sessions and participate on election day. Comments from PCN participants following the Managua session included: “I used to think it was just me and my mom out there, but now I feel the strength of the Conservative Party.” “I promise to pass on this information to those who will defend the vote.” “I promise to be one of the best trainers and have the best pollwatchers.” “We will not die [as a party].”

⁶ The number of pollwatchers each trainer prepares will depend upon several factors, including party resources.

⁷ See Appendix E for further data about the training program.

Indicator 2.2: Information about domestic monitoring efforts reaches the public through media coverage throughout the country, including the outlying regions.

Civil Society Observation

- Since receiving media training in Washington, Solorzano has applied many of the lessons learned during the training, including the repeating the organization's message. ET's press person commented on Solorzano's improvements in relating to the media after observing a press conference with Organization of American States (OAS) representative Santiago Murray.
- NDI representatives – staff members and international experts – have made over 15 media appearances, including interviews for the written press and television talk shows with national audiences, opportunities they used to share information about the importance of domestic election observation and NDI's work, helping to add to ET's credibility and build confidence in the CSE.
- Over 22 individuals representing 17 media outlets attended NDI's media breakfast. Through the breakfast, NDI built relationships with journalists and helped to ensure more complete and accurate coverage of monitoring efforts and to increase public confidence in the process.⁸

Other Results

Political Party Monitoring

- Forty per cent of the participants in the pollwatcher training program were women, and 8 per cent represented the Atlantic Coast, indicating gender and ethnic diversity.
- During a recent party meeting, PCN leaders from the national and departmental levels praised the program, calling it an "excellent opportunity" to strengthen the capacity of pollwatchers. The departmental leaders pledged to help provide the resources the trainers need to prepare the pollwatchers. The party found the training so useful that it sent table officials to participate as well.
- Participants in the pollwatcher training program expressed a greater understanding of civic responsibility following the sessions. Trainers stressed the importance of the participants' work and the pride they will feel after the elections. They also emphasized ethics and objectivity, and the importance of quick results. Each participant in the training program signed the *Compromiso por Nicaragua*, committing themselves to upholding the laws and respecting the will of the people.⁹

⁸ See Appendix F for photos from media breakfast.

⁹ See Appendix G for a copy of the *Compromiso*.

Civil Society Observation

- During Solorzano's trip to Washington, NDI arranged for him to meet with representatives of the National Security Council, Congress, State Department and USAID. The meetings helped to educate the D.C. community about the challenges in the elections process and to build support for the role of ET.
- The NDI-sponsored visits of experts such as Roncagliolo and NDI director for Latin America and the Caribbean programs Gerardo Le Chevallier provided ET with important political support, encouraging the public to support the results of the quick count and ET's other observation conclusions.
- NDI advised the CSE on ways to strengthen the administration of the election and build public confidence, including: the introduction of measures to facilitate the ballot counting process; speeding up the transmission of results and their rapid communication to the public; and the importance of the quick counts by independent organizations and allowing the release of their results to the public. NDI also advised technical personnel assisting the CSE, in particular advisors from the Organization of American States, on the introduction of measures to increase confidence in the electoral process and in the transmission of the results.

IV. EVALUATION

NDI has faced some challenges in implementing the program, which include the following:

- Participants in the training program shared with NDI their concern about receiving adequate resources from their parties to carry out the training of pollwatchers. The parties' lack of resources may affect the number of trained pollwatchers that the parties field on election day.
- Participation in the pollwatcher training session in Managua was lower than anticipated due to the rescheduling of a CSE pollworker training to the same day.
- NDI could not finalize the materials or commence the trainings for *fiscales* in the data centers until the CSE had made decisions regarding the data transmission process, thereby delaying the training.